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Promotion and protection of human rights

Letter dated 3 June 2008 from the representatives of the Permanent Missions of Australia, Honduras, Mali, Slovenia, Ukraine and the United States of America to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

We have the pleasure of transmitting the Declaration on Prisoners of Conscience (see annex), on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We would appreciate it if the Declaration could be circulated as a document of the General Assembly under agenda item 70.

(*Signed*) Robert **Hill**
Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations

(*Signed*) Jorge Arturo **Reina Idiaquez**
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Honduras to the United Nations

(*Signed*) Ami **Diallo**
First Counsellor of the Republic of Mali to the United Nations

(*Signed*) Sanja **Štiglic**
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Slovenia to the United Nations (on behalf of the European Union)

(*Signed*) Yuriy **Sergeyev**
Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the United Nations

(*Signed*) Zalmay **Khalilzad**
Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations

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Annex to the letter dated 3 June 2008 from the representatives of the Permanent Missions of Australia, Honduras, Mali, Slovenia, Ukraine and the United States of America to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Declaration on Prisoners of Conscience

Mr. President, we have the honour to deliver the present declaration on behalf of Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Benin, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lebanon, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Mali, Micronesia (Federated States of), Moldova, Monaco, Mongolia, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Palau, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Samoa, San Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Timor-Leste, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America and Vanuatu.

As set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 1948, everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association; and everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Sixty years ago those simple truths were recognized by the United Nations. Since then we have many times reaffirmed these fundamental freedoms.

Regrettably, in the sixtieth anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there are still numerous violations of these rights — violations that are well-known and documented by United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms, resolutions of this body and other international and regional organizations. We particularly deplore the practice of imprisoning people for trying to exercise these rights peacefully — to speak their views, to gather in public, to publish opinion including opinion that is critical of standing Governments, and to seek or disseminate information including through the Internet. Unfortunately, there are many examples of Governments employing imprisonment as a strategy for dealing with their political opposition or with human rights defenders. There are numerous cases of prisoners of conscience being confined to jails and prisons, or held under house arrest for long periods of time to prevent them from speaking to or assembling with others. Compounding the problem, many of those prisoners are held in abysmal conditions, where they suffer life-threatening health crises.

This body is replete with Member States that have been or are being led by former prisoners of conscience. These historic figures, once persecuted by their own Governments and maligned as criminals for exercising rights and freedoms that we have all agreed are inalienable and fundamental, are today recognized for what they have always been, men and women of courage and of conscience who peacefully pressed for change at great risk to themselves and on behalf of their fellow citizens.

The nations joining in this statement commit themselves to work for the freedom of prisoners of conscience and to make their release a key priority in their

relations with other States. We further agree to encourage the States Members of the United Nations to affirm their commitment embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that all citizens may freely express their opinions and assemble peacefully without fear of reprisal.

The nations joining in this statement call upon the General Assembly to be seized of this matter in the future.